

# **What is Socialism?**

**An Anarchist Perspective.**

**By Jason Brannigan**

The following is a piece written by Jason Brannigan from Organise! submitted in May 2007 as part of the James Connolly Debating Society's "What is Socialism?" discussion.

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## An Anarchist Perspective

*"Freedom without socialism  
is privilege and injustice.  
Socialism without freedom  
is slavery and brutality."*

— Mikhail Bakunin



SOCIALISM CAN BE many, very different, things. For anarchists it must be libertarian, indeed class struggle anarchists often interchangeably describe themselves as socialists or libertarian communists. Anarchists are socialists who believe that socialism must be built out of the struggles of working class people acting in their own class interests. 'Socialism' cannot be imposed from above.

Some on the left have tried to attack anarchism on the basis that such and such a person said something in the past that was obviously dodgy. This may be a fun game, but it misses the anti-authoritarian and collective nature of

class-struggle anarchism. Anarchists do not refer to themselves as Bakuninists, Proudhonists, or Kropotkinites; this is quite deliberate. While two of those mentioned have actually contributed to anarchist thought, and to the struggles of working people (and indeed prophetic warning for all socialists from Bakunin is quoted at the start of this submission) Proudhon was far from advocating class struggle anarchism. Anarchists do not hang on the every word of any one dead revolutionary, and refuse to get tied to pseudo-religious dogma which tries to pass itself off as socialism.

Class struggle anarchists largely accept Marx's analysis of the workings of the capitalist system, yet we feel no need to name ourselves after the deity Marx as a result. There are significant differences between large sections of the socialist movement and anarchism; the most fundamental of them relates to 'consciousness', or the ability of working class people to act in their own interests, and in the quite reasonable assertion that socialism cannot be achieved via, or implemented by, the state.

Anarchists don't get involved with parliamentary democracy. At best it is a distraction and a sham, at worst, well... it has led to all sorts of oppositional parties elected into power only to accommodate themselves to the 'economic realities', and implement the very things they were opposed to before they got in.

These 'economic realities' are, of course, enforced by the global capitalist elite—they are not the ones the rest of us face day-to-day in our lives. There are other reasons for opposing the use of the state to deliver socialism. One is that any body which sets itself up as a governing class, over and above the rest of us, actually becomes a new ruling class with its own interests to defend. Simply, even with the best intentions in the world, socialists who utilise the state to bring about socialism on 'our behalf' become the 'new boss'.

So anarchists aren't about building a political party, and if they aren't about running in elections or seizing the state by other means, what are they about? Anarchists want to improve the everyday conditions, for ourselves and other working class people, while struggling towards the revolutionary transformation that can create a free and equal society: one based on mutual aid and cooperation. We believe in workers' control, in workers running their own communities and workplaces because, basically, those are the people best placed to do it. Is that utopian and far-fetched? Perhaps, but let's consider the alternative: the continuation of the current system.

The current system is not working, or rather it is, for the rich and powerful. It certainly does not serve working class people across the globe, nor is it working in terms of the environmental legacy we will leave our grandchildren.

Stress and overwork affect more and more people while others are flung on the dole; we live in a world of plentiful resources, yet millions starve. Some people make vast fortunes just because they own companies, land, property, or natural resources, while those of us who create the wealth, work the land, and build the properties struggle to pay for the natural resources and commodities we create. Politicians tell us there's no money—not for wages, pensioners, benefits, or local amenities. And yet there's always plenty for war (and politicians' pay raises).

Locally and globally the gap between the richest and the poorest sections of society has never been so great. For all humanity's technological advances we spend more time working than people did forty years ago. Yet instead of a war on poverty they've got a war on 'benefit fraud', a war on drugs, and a 'war on terror' while the institutions that create war, poverty, and environmental destruction stigmatise, imprison, and deport the resulting refugees.

None of this is inevitable or coincidental. It all comes back down to capitalism—an economic system defined by wage slavery and the accumulation of profit from other people's work.

Anarchists believe that "the emancipation of the working class shall be the task of the workers ourselves!" In practical

terms this has meant groups like Organise! support workers against their bosses, against victimisation, and to demand higher wages and better conditions. Anarchists intervene practically to support workers engaged in disputes, and are also active in their own workplaces and communities.

The focus on the workplace comes from the recognition of the power of our class as producers. Anarchists seek to get involved in and relate to struggles as they develop out of the needs and experiences of working class people. Some have called approaches to 'socialism' that are based on the day to day struggles of working class people, and which seek to build class unity around actual instances of class struggle, 'abstract'. I have to ask then, what exactly is more abstract? Is it the reality of life under capitalism that is experienced by the vast majority of people in the north, across these islands, and globally? Or is it some more 'concrete' reality such as the desire to see a mythic 'nation once again' Ireland created before we can have 'socialism'? It seems obvious to me which is the more abstract.

Anarchists, or libertarian socialists, are opposed to capitalism and the state. As such they are opposed to the mythologies of nationalism and nation states. In Ireland this means opposition to rule from Westminster, the Dáil, and our widely celebrated 'new' local assembly at Stormont. Both

British and Irish nationalism have often been as detrimental to the life experiences and interests of working class in the north as have policies emanating from Westminster.

We are indeed in a new era. Not one where we hand over control to those involved in power-sharing—a control that is, in reality, only a small hand in administering a system suited to the needs of the wealthy and powerful. Not one in which we have to believe the hype around Gerry and Paisley sharing ‘power’. But one where we can begin to re-examine our real interests while dropping the mystification and worn out symbols. Our interests do not lie with ‘our’ nation—British or Irish, whatever that may mean—they lie with our fellow workers, who together with us create the wealth of the world but who are not allowed a full share of it.

Libertarian socialists want to secure, together with other working class people, a full and equal share of the wealth and social benefits created by the combined labour of our class; this means abolishing the capitalist system. Anarchists also want to build a world based on direct democracy and worker control of production; this means abolishing the state and not replacing it with any other centralised or hierarchical political body, but with a system of federations and delegation—where delegates are directly elected and immediately recallable.

Anarchists reject all systems of oppression and all attempts to divide people through discrimination and prejudice. They Recognise capitalism’s catastrophic effect on the natural environment, and they seek to develop a future based on sustainable communities. Anarchists are internationalist and reject all artificial borders and boundaries, just as we reject all the politicians and governments that require them. We do not regard ourselves as a ‘vanguard’, and we do not want to be the new leaders of a hierarchically organised labour movement, let alone seize the state in the name of the workers.

We as working class people have agency: we can act, we can start with small, attainable victories. The working class still has the means to replace capitalism with a free and socialist society. The road to revolution is long and hard. If it were easy, it would not be called a struggle. We believe that for the confidence and ability of working class people to be built to the extent that this future becomes possible, all our struggles must be under the direct control of those involved in them, and be based on direct action—that is, directly controlled by those involved and not mediated through politicians or trade union bureaucrats. We believe, and history supports our belief, that ‘socialism’ will be achieved by the working class itself, or it will not be achieved at all.

# North American Class Struggle Anarchist Organizations



**A New World In Our Hearts**  
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**Miami Autonomy & Solidarity**

MIAMI, FL

[miamiautonomyandsolidarity.wordpress.com](http://miamiautonomyandsolidarity.wordpress.com)



**Rochester Red and Black**

ROCHESTER, NY

[www.rocredandblack.org](http://www.rocredandblack.org)



LIBERTARIAN COMMUNIST FEDERATION

Common Struggle—Libertarian  
Communist Federation

NORTHEAST USA

[www.CommonStruggle.org](http://www.CommonStruggle.org)



**First of May Anarchist Alliance (M1)**  
DETROIT, MI



**Four Star Anarchist Collective**

CHICAGO, IL

[4sao.wordpress.com](http://4sao.wordpress.com)

**Wild Rose Collective**

IOWA CITY, IA

<http://wildrosecollective.org/>

WILD ROSE  COLLECTIVE



**Workers Solidarity Alliance**

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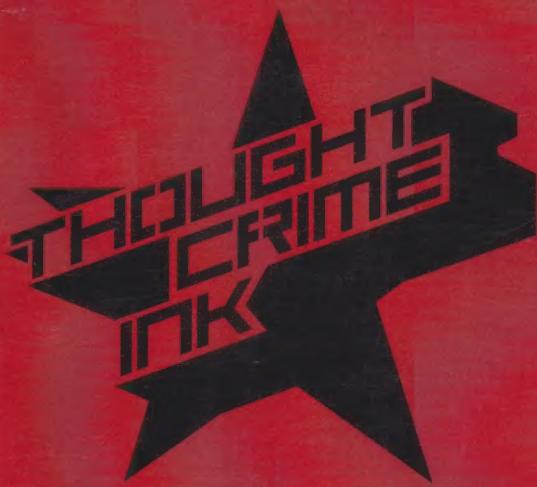
[workersolidarity.org](http://workersolidarity.org)

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